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ABSTRACT

In order to test the effectiveness of the use of pets with the elderly in a nursing home setting, three concurrent studies were conducted. The 29 residents participating in the experiment were selected by nursing home personnel as meeting the criteria of being depressed and withdrawn, and receiving no regular (weekly) visitors. Study I compared group differences in responsiveness to others in each of three conditions: pet therapy group, visitor-only group, and control group. Study II measured individual responses in the pet therapy condition over time. Study III was a single case experiment. Pet therapy and visitor-only visits were scheduled for 15 minutes each, once weekly for 6 weeks, in the privacy of the resident's room. Two original instruments were used to score behaviors. The Baseline Behavior Observation Form was used for pre- and post-observations. The Resident/Pet Observation Form was used to score pet therapy visits. Results of all three studies showed that following the introduction of pets to the nursing home, residents engaged in more social behaviors such as speaking to peers, making eye contact, smiling, and initiating conversation with the researcher. Overall results indicate that pets could significantly increase social behaviors in elderly nursing home residents. (LLL)

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Use of Pets in Therapy With Elderly Nursing Home Residents[1]

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to study the effect of pets used in therapy with elderly depressed and withdrawn nursing home residents. The subjects were twenty-nine caucasian male and female elderly nursing home residents. The research consisted of three separate studies done concurrently. Study I compared group differences in responsiveness to others in each of three conditions: pet therapy group, visitor-only group and control group. Study II measured individual responses of people in the pet therapy condition over time. Study III was a single case experiment, ABA design. Results indicated use of pets could significantly increase sociable behaviors in the elderly nursing home residents.

Use of Pets in Therapy
With Elderly Nursing Home Residents

Nursing home residents have sometimes been found to improve when their general environment changes. It is not clear, however, which changes can be used to bring about improvement. The introduction of pets for therapeutic purposes is one of the changes that may be useful.

When a person reaches a nursing home they are usually the victim of many losses. By virtue of their age they have probably retired from work, if they did work outside the home, thus reducing social contacts and their economic status. They may have suffered the death of a spouse, brothers and sisters, children, and, no doubt, many friends. As a result of their disabilities they may have had to stop watching television, reading, crocheting or other handwork, and, because of their illness, their own self-care. All of these together, and particularly the loss of independence, prove quite destructive to self-image and esteem.

Since much attention must be paid to the physical care of residents, psychological problems frequently encountered in the nursing home, reported by

Corson & Corson (1980) to include, "loneliness, depression, hopelessness, helplessness, boredom and low self-esteem," are often left unresolved. While recreational and occupational therapy are provided to help rescue residents from idleness, they do not help resolve the psychological problems associated with the transition to nursing home life (Levinson, 1972).

The feeling of being rejected and unloved is a serious one. If only this need for affection and companionship, not feeling so cut off, could be met, many residents would more easily make the adjustment. This is where pets, used as therapy, enter the picture. As Brickel (1980-81) states, "...pets...provide constant, unquestioning sources of comfort and affection." Busted & Hines(1983) report, "Animals have boundless capacity for acceptance, adoration, attention, forgiveness and unconditional love." Pets not only offer companionship, but encourage conversation, reduce anxiety, lower blood pressure and improve self-esteem (Connelly, 1981). They also encourage play, which is very relaxing (Mather, 1981). Similarly, Levinson (1978) reports pets may be beneficial for "holding a shaky personality together,

a growth experience, decreased loneliness, retardation of devolution and senility, and increased interaction with other people."

According to Angier (1983), "Researcher's have found that everybody says that their dog or cat is important to them." Recently there has been an upsurge in bumper stickers on cars expressing, "I Love My Cat/Dog." People are openly expressing their feelings about their pets.

The value of pets in not only improving the quality of life, but in possibly extending life has been reported (Connelly, 1981). Statistics have indicated the single most important contributing factor to heart attack victims surviving their first critical year, after the severity of the attack itself, was whether or not the person had a pet (Angier, 1981; Dolan, 1980; Kidd & Feldman, 1981).

Also, research has shown that the blood presure goes down when people talk to animals (Angier, 1983). It is believed this occurs because a pet allows a person to express deep inner feelings and love, without risk, commitment or being judged (Mather, 1981). Also, touching, which is not socially acceptable to many,

occurs frequently and repeatedly with pets, thus contributing to the person's psychological well-being. Brickel (1980-81) reports, "Pets...probably are a major factor in maintaining the psychological equilibrium of their owners." Brickel (1982) while not questioning the therapeutic value of pets in diminishing anxiety or attenuating depression, tries to explain why pets are therapeutic. It is believed the pet provides a distraction that allows for a shift of attention from aversive stimuli. The behavior is thus positively reinforced by the removal of the aversive stimuli.

One criticism to the use of pets was the possibility that attachment to pets would diminish attachments and interaction with humans (Templer, Salter, Dickey, Baldwin & Veleber, 1981). However, the opposite was found to be true, that actually the person who is able to relate well to a pet has a better prognosis for doing so with humans. Brickel (1980-81) reports a pet "...attenuates the pain of social isolation and depression, and actively serves a role in preventing social withdrawal and alienation."

It has been found that pet ownership is not necessary in order to benefit from many of these favorable results (Castledine, 1981). Dramatic changes

are often reported in the elderly exposed to pets. Brickel (1980-81) reports on a man who spoke for the first time in 26 years after being shown a dog.

Francis (1981) stated, "One wet dog kiss or cat cheek-nuzzling may be worth at least one dose of medication." And, this seems literally to be true. According to Mather (1981) the benefits of pets include: tactile comfort, enhancing our importance, let us be ourselves, companionship, security, ego enhancement, act as scapegoats, increase our self-confidence, give us an opportunity to play, teach responsibility, encourage conversation, allow us to give love and to feel love in return, and, they don't hold grudges.

Animals may not only help the nursing home residents, but may benefit the staff as well. Pets can serve to open a means of communication between the residents and staff. Also, besides providing all of these benefits to humans, the pets themselves seem to benefit. Busted & Hines (1983) review a study in which it was found that "the canine heart beat and blood pressure slowed dramatically in response to petting." An additional benefit is described by Brickel (1980-81), who reports, "Pets might...attract

volunteers..." As psychologist Ann Ballard states, "Everybody gets along better when there are pets around (Angier, 1983).

Because of the benefits reported to the elderly, many agencies and nursing homes have begun using pets with their patients and residents. Among them, Baltimore County Department of Aging began a "Pets on Wheels" program in April, 1983, that uses pet owners who volunteer their pets. After a thorough screening process to determine the state of health of the animal and personality suitability, the owner and animal are assigned to visit area nursing home residents.

It was for the evaluation of this program that this study was set up to experimentally test the effectiveness of the use of pets with the elderly in a nursing home setting. It was hypothesized that the pets would have a significant positive effect on the sociable behaviors of the elderly nursing home residents.

Method

Subjects

The subjects for this study were thirty-one Caucasian nursing home residents. The sixteen females and fifteen males were selected by nursing home

personnel as meeting the criteria of being depressed and withdrawn, and receiving no regular (weekly) visitors. These residents were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions --ten to receive pet therapy (plus one extra resident to serve as a replacement if necessary), ten to receive visitors only, and ten to serve as control.

One resident in the pet therapy group died before completion of the study, which necessitated using the replacement resident. Also, two residents had to be replaced in the pet therapy group as they showed extreme fear on initial exposure to the dog. Additionally, one resident in the visitor-only condition was dropped because the visitor did not follow the required guidelines.

The usable residents thus included a total of twenty-nine participants, ten in the pet therapy cell, nine in the visitor-only cell, and ten in the control group cell.

Design

Three studies were done concurrently. The first compared group differences on dependent variables including: Speaks to peers, Speaks to staff member,

Makes eye contact, Smiles, Reaches out to another person, Responds to researcher's smile, Initiates conversation with researcher, in each of the three conditions, pet therapy group, visitor-only group, control group (Study I). The second measured the individual responses of people in the pet therapy condition over time (Study II). The third was a single case experiment, ABA design (Study III).

Procedure

The two suburban nursing homes used were located within several miles of each other, and privately owned by the same corporation. Therefore, location, policies and personnel were comparable. The two dogs used (one at each nursing home), a Golden Retriever and a part-German Shepherd, were comparable in size and temperament. These dogs were health-certified by a veterinarian and disposition-approved by a screening board. Pet therapy and visitor-only visits were scheduled for fifteen minutes each, once-a-week, for six-weeks, in the privacy of the resident's room. The visitors were Life Support volunteers supplied by Baltimore County Department of Aging. Each of the residents in the visitor-only group were visited by the same volunteer for the entire six weeks.

Instruments

Two original instruments were used to score behaviors. A Baseline Behavior Observation Form was used for pre and post observations. A Resident/Pet Observation Form was used to score pet therapy visits.

Guidelines set up for baseline behavior observations dictated that a pretest be done by the researcher and another observer prior to beginning observations, in order to establish reliability of at least 80%. Baseline observations were completed using two observers. Because of the criteria being observed it was necessary for the resident to be either in a common area or a shared room, so that interactions could occur.

Each participant was then observed for a fifteen minute period. Scoring was done on the Baseline Behavior Observation Form, which measured seven criteria: Speaks to peers, Speaks to staff member, Makes eye contact, Smiles, Reaches out to another person, Responds to researcher's smile, Initiates conversation with researcher. Two minutes prior to the end of the observation period the researcher approached the resident being observed and smiled. The resident was then allowed fifteen seconds to respond to the

smile and to initiate conversation with the researcher. If no response was forthcoming the researcher initiated conversation.

For Study II, those residents in the pet therapy condition were additionally observed at each pet visit, using the Resident/Pet Observation Form, which measured nine criteria: Speaks to pet, Speaks to pet owner, Makes eye contact with pet, Makes eye contact with pet owner, Reaches out to pet, Touches pet, Touches pet owner, Smiles, Laughs audibly.

At the end of six visits/weeks a final fifteen minute observation was done on each of the participants, using the Baseline Behavior Observation guidelines, by a single observer.

Further, after completion of the post observations, the dog was withheld from one resident in the pet therapy group for a period of two weeks, and an interim observation done. The dog was then returned to the resident and after two weeks a final observation was made.

Results

Study I

Study I was the comparison of group differences in each of three conditions: pet therapy group,

visitor-only group and control group. Analyses of variance were performed to test the effects of group membership on various dependent variables including: Speaks to peers, Speaks to staff member, Makes eye contact, Smiles, Reaches out to another person, Responds to researcher's smile, Initiates conversation with researcher. Of these, four were significant to at least a .05 level: Speaks to peers, Makes eye contact, Smiles and Initiates conversation with researcher.

From these analyses of variance, Speaks to peers, $F(2, 26) = 4.21$, $p < .05$ (pet therapy group $M = 6.8$, $SD = 7.90$, visitor-only group $M = 2.1$, $SD = 3.89$, control group $M = 0.3$, $SD = 0.95$); Makes eye contact, $F(2, 26) = 16.10$, $p < .05$ (pet therapy group $M = 12.1$, $SD = 7.39$, visitor-only group $M = 2.33$, $SD = 4.21$, control group $M = 0.3$, $SD = 0.67$); Smiles, $F(2, 26) = 3.92$, $p < .05$ (pet therapy group $M = 3.3$, $SD = 4.74$, visitor-only group $M = 0.22$, $SD = 0.67$, control group $M = 0.2$, $SD = 0.42$); Initiates conversation with researcher, $F(2, 26) = 3.35$, $p < .01$ (pet therapy group $M = 0.4$, $SD = 0.52$, visitor-only group $M = 0.11$, $SD = 0.33$, control group $M = 0.0$).

Therefore, the results suggest that residents in the pet therapy group engaged in more social behaviors such as speaking to peers, making eye contact, smiling, and initiating conversation with the researcher.

Study II

Study II measured individual changes in the pet therapy condition over time. Changes were measured on the variables: Speaks to pet, Speaks to pet owner, Makes eye contact with pet, Makes eye contact with pet owner, Reaches out to pet, Touches pet, Touches pet owner, Smiles, Laughs audibly. When the results were graphed there did not appear to be clear trends on any of the variables. Increases in behavior for each of the variables over the six-week period were noted as follows: Speaks to pet --50% of the individuals showed an increase in this behavior; Speaks to pet owner--50%; Makes eye contact with pet--80%; Makes eye contact with pet owner--80%; Reaches out to pet--60%; Touches pet--60%; Touches pet owner--30%; Smiles--70%; Laughs audibly--50%.

Looking at individuals' trends, three individuals stood out as having upward trends over time on most, if not all, the variables. Other than meeting the

criteria for inclusion in the study there seemed to be nothing unique about these individuals. Case studies on two of the individuals follow, while the third will be discussed under Study III.

Dorcas

Dorcas, in her 80's, was quite ill when she arrived at the nursing home. Withdrawn, unhappy, and with little hope, she just existed.

With the introduction of "Brandy," a Golden Retriever, her life seemed to take on new meaning. Dorcas developed a tremendous bond with Brandy. She hugged, petted, and talked to Brandy on their many visits. If Brandy was a little late she worried that something had happened. As Dorcas is quick to say, "It was love at first sight."

Shortly after the arrival of Brandy, Dorcas had a dentist come and fit her with teeth so she could eat "real" food. She dresses now instead of wearing gowns and robes all of the time. Large-print books are read to fill "empty-time," and Dorcas anticipates participating in some activities in the near future.

The change in Dorcas' attitude is most impressive. Previously, she complained all of the time, about

everything. Recently, however, she noted the change in her attitude, and stated she is very content. She went on to list many good points of nursing home life, and to state how happy she is now. Dorcas still loves Brandy dearly and looks forward to her regular visits.

Mary

Mary, in her 80's, was critically ill following surgery when "Brandy," a Golden Retriever, made her first appearance.

As Brandy stood by her bed, Mary opened her eyes and, not even noticing the people around her, made a feeble attempt to move a few fingers toward Brandy. The next two visits were similar, but Mary finally succeeded in petting Brandy on the nose. The next visit found Mary awake, talking to, and petting Brandy. Mary has progressed remarkably since that time, and at present is ambulatory.

Mary has stated that knowing Brandy was going to visit regularly, each week, gave her something to anticipate. She attributes much of the credit for her splendid recovery and positive attitude to the love and caring exhibited by Brandy and her owner.

Study III

This is a case study and a single case experiment, ABA design, with one individual, a 79-year old male. Baseline behaviors for this individual indicated that he was not verbal with his peers or staff, did not reach out to another person, did not smile, and made eye contact only once during the observation. During the first manipulation, when the pet was introduced, his behavior in these areas increased considerably, particularly in the areas of speaking to peers, making eye contact, smiling, and reaching out to another person. The pet was then withdrawn for a two-week period, at which time these behaviors decreased to almost the point of the original baseline. Finally, when the pet was returned the behaviors increased greatly, in most cases exceeding the highest level reached prior to removal of the pet.

Charlie

Charlie was typical of many nursing home residents. He sat in the hall, in his wheelchair, day in and day out, usually dozing, confused, and with never a smile or kind word to say to anyone.

The first day when "Tootsie," a part-German Shepherd mutt, came to visit Charlie he was quite

surprised, even though he had acknowledged earlier he would like to have a pet visit. Charlie held the leash and "walked" Tootsie as he was wheeled to his room for his private visit. After the visit Charlie was asked if he would like Tootsie to return the following week. His response was a very non-commital, "I guess it'll be okay."

In the following weeks, however, Charlie enjoyed the attention he got from others (peers and staff) when he walked Tootsie to his room. He brushed Tootsie, talked to her, played with her and watched her, smiling constantly.

Charlie seemed to be more interested in his surroundings at other times as well, and more civil to those around him.

After six weeks, Tootsie was withdrawn for two weeks. By the end of the two weeks Charlie had reverted to his old behavior.

Tootsie was then returned for two weeks and a final observation made. At this time Charlie was observed inching his wheelchair over to a female resident with whom he initiated conversation. They talked and laughed. The staff was quite excited about this behavior and the nurse on duty commented this was

the first time since Charlie had been in the home, for several years, that he had done anything like this. A short time later, when the researcher approached Charlie he grabbed her and hugged and kissed her. The staff was astounded by his response, and Charlie seemed very pleased with himself.

Since that time, follow-up has found Charlie is now participating in activities on a regular basis. He enjoys being with his peers, and joking with the staff. He has become a pleasant person to be around, and continues to see his "therapist" Tootsie, on a regular basis.

Discussion

In Study I the hypothesis was supported for four of the variables: Speaks to peers, Makes eye contact, Smiles, Initiates conversation with researcher. In Study II it appeared that for certain individuals the introduction of pets led to major positive changes in behavior. In Study III the manipulation (introduction of pet) improved social behaviors in the manner predicted. To summarize, there was partial support for the overall hypothesis.

Similar to Brickel (1980-81) who reported on the man who spoke for the first time in 26 years after

being shown a dog, this study included a low-verbal male resident who became quite verbal after exposure over time to a dog.

Like Hendy (1983) who reported that "live pets are effective at increasing desirable behaviors in nursing home residents," this study also found the introduction of pets resulted in the increase of positive changes in social behavior in nursing home residents.

Some factors that may have been responsible for not achieving significant results on all of the variables include: residents' past experiences with pets, health problems of the individual residents, medication, and, in one case, deep concern over a seriously ill spouse.

There may have been a confound because of the fact that the pets were always accompanied by the pet owner. Since, in some cases, residents later formed relationships with the pet owner, the pets may have served to facilitate the formation of these relationships. This certainly is an area for further investigation.

Future research might also study whether pets improve cognitive performance, as a result of the

stimulation involved. Additionally, such areas as general health and morale improvement, as a result of pet exposure, could be pursued. Finally, since evidence exists as a result of Study II and Study III that behavior changes last over time, it would be logical to further investigate this area as well.

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